LESSON 6: COMMUNICATING IN GROUPS

barriers
distortion
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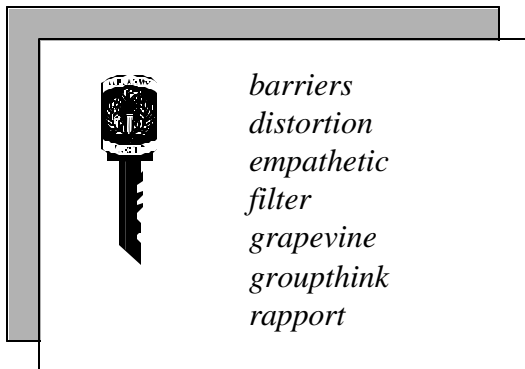
INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, you will examine some of the characteristics and social influences that can affect group communications. In addition, you will have the opportunity to see how communication **barriers** and break-downs can affect your ability to communicate effectively and how you can establish credibility through your communications.

The art of communicating is a skill that you must develop. Using words so that listeners or readers understand their meanings is a difficult task because of differences in background, education, and experience of individuals with whom you are trying to communicate.

Throughout this lesson, remember that the purpose of communication is to make known and exchange information, thoughts, opinions, or feelings by speech, writing, or gestures. It is a transmission and interchange, by any means, of information, feelings, and direction. A communicator must remember that communication is a circular process, with both parties being free to present as well as to receive ideas, feelings, and attitudes.

ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

Remember, the communication process is made up of various elements. These elements are communicators (senders), messages, receivers, channels (written words, sound, sight, radio, television), feedback, noise, and setting. See page 67 for details on each element.

The group communication process follows the same format. In groups, the communicator may send a message to several receivers that attach different meanings or interpretations to the message and, in turn, may offer different feedback.

GROUP COMMUNICATION

Whenever there is a group of people together for any length of time, there will be social groups. Membership in these groups normally depends on factors such as skill, ability, job assignment, ethnic background, interests, or values. If you look around your school, you will probably be able to identify many social groups.

INFLUENCES OF A SOCIAL GROUP

Not only can there be one or more social groups within an organization, they can have a great deal of impact on the operation of the organization. By uniting, members of a social group (or of social groups if there are more than one in an organization) can influence a leader's action — or the actions of the leadership in the organization — in regard to making decisions on policies, rules, or procedures.

DEFINITION OF A SMALL GROUP

Most people would define a small group as having at least three and no more than twelve or fifteen members. A group needs to have at least three members, otherwise it would be difficult to make decisions. With three members, coalitions can be formed and some kind of organization is present. Too large of a group (more than twelve or fifteen members) inhibits the group members' ability to communicate with everyone else in the group.

Within the group, roles will evolve and procedures will be developed as to how the group functions. A group must have a common purpose or goal and they must work together to achieve that goal. The goal brings the group together and holds it together through conflict and tension.

DECISION-MAKING IN GROUPS

Many groups meet to solve problems or make decisions. Typically, a six-step approach is used to make decisions within a group.

1. Identify the problem. What is the problem? What is wrong with the current situation?

2. Analyze the problem. What are the issues in play in your group's situation?

3. Identify the goals. What are the goals of the final decision?

4. Generate the solution(s). Generate as many solutions as possible. Avoid **groupthink** by listing many solutions. (Groups experiencing groupthink do not consider all alternatives and they desire unanimity at the expense of quality decisions. They are focused on reaching a decision, not finding the best solution.)

5. Evaluate and select the solutions. Measure each solution against the goals from step three.

6. Implement the solution(s). Enact the chosen solution(s).

BRAINSTORMING

Another option for decision-making is brainstorming. When brainstorming, group members are encouraged to generate as many ideas about a particular topic as they can. Group members should be encouraged to say anything that comes to mind when brainstorming. Every idea is written down and judgments about ideas are saved until later, when the group returns to all of the ideas and selects those that are most useful.

NOMINAL GROUP DECISION-MAKING

Nominal group decision-making is a group decision-making tool used when the group must place a set of options in a preferred order. In order to use the nominal method, group members work individually to list all alternatives to a problem or issue. Sometimes, the nominal method is used after a brainstorming session is held. The group facilitator asks each group member to individually rank all of the options from highest to lowest priority. Finally, the facilitator computes an average score for each idea. The lowest score is the highest priority for the group.

MAKING A FINAL DECISION

There are many ways that a group can make a final decision, decide on a solution, or come to agreement. Some of the most popular ways of making the decision include:

- Consensus: The group members all agree on the final decision through discussion and debate.

- Compromise: Through discussion and readjustment of the final plan, group members come to agreement by giving up some of their demands.

- Majority Vote: The decision is based on the opinion of the majority of its members.

- Decision by the Leader: The group gives the final decision to its leader.

- Arbitration: An external body or person makes a decision for the group.

LEADERSHIP IN GROUPS

Leadership is concerned with control and power in a group. Leadership can be aimed at either maintaining the social relationships in the group or facilitating the group to achieve its task. Groups will sometimes have two leaders: one for the social dimension and one for the task dimension.

Some researchers believe certain people are born with traits that will make them good leaders in all situations. A second perspective is that the group's leader selects an appropriate leadership style for the given task. A third way of understanding leadership says that to some degree, leaders are born with traits that make them good leaders, but that they also learn how to become leaders and use strategies appropriate to a given situation.

There are four main styles of leadership:

- Autocratic: The leader uses his or her authority to make decisions.

- Democratic: Authority is shared and all group members help make decisions.

- Laissez-faire: A "hands-off" style in which the leader allows the group to make its own decisions.

- No leader: No one in the group exercises leadership. This style, says researchers, leads to group disintegration and is followed by autocratic leadership.

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

In Lesson 3, you learned that there are many barriers to effective listening. These barriers can also interfere with effective communication in groups and lead to the **distortion** of communication. Once you understand how these barriers impact group communication, you can do your part to overcome them.

- Laziness. Effective communication can be hard work.

- Internal distractions. Sometimes group members may have a lot on their minds and it is hard for them to concentrate on what someone else is saying.

- Past relationships. If members of the group have either a poor or an excellent past relationship with each other, this can affect communication.

- Lack of trust. Believing that other members of the group have betrayed your trust or that they do not have your best interests in mind is a barrier.

- Lack of self-confidence. If a group member does not sound confident, another member may have a harder time staying focused.

- Prejudice. Prejudice can effect both how we hear others as well as how we receive the information.

- The "halo" effect. If a group member has an association with someone or something the group already likes, the group is much more likely to be receptive to the member as well as the information. Members may not question what they should question.

- The "horns" effect. If a group member has an association with someone or something about which the group has negative feelings, the group may not listen the way they should.

- External distractions. Sometimes there are a lot of things going on in the same location where the group is trying to listen to each other.

- A different level of power between members. One member may have the authority, and one not. Either way, it can impact how members communicate.

- Gender preferences. One group member may have different expectations because of the gender of another member.

- Emotionality on the part of a member. If a member gets passionate about the topic, it may distract other members from hearing the real message.

- Prejudging the message before the entire message has been delivered. Sometimes a member will say something at the start of a speech or conversation that may distract another member from effectively listening to the rest.

- Allowing personal characteristics of another member to get in the way. If one group member was dirty or smelled unpleasantly, for example, another member might not attend to everything that is said.

- Not caring about another group member. Being indifferent to a person can affect how well another member pays attention to the message.

- Interrupting. Sometimes a group member is so excited about an idea he or she wants to share, that the member does not wait for the communicator's thoughts to be completed. This distracts both the sender and the receiver of the message.

- Trigger words. Some words evoke an emotional response that prevents effective communication. These words are distracting because they make group members concentrate on something else besides what is being said. Sometimes trigger words will represent different things to different members of a group. This also leaves room for misinterpretation.

- Delivery style. Sometimes the way information is delivered can be distracting. One group member might have a very monotone voice, or may continuously put in verbal pauses like "uh" or "you know." Any of these things may cause other members to concentrate more on the delivery than the content.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

Each member of a group has psychological needs. If these needs are not met, it can create problems. Psychological barriers to communication are more difficult to identify and overcome than other barriers, and require leaders and group members to possess and apply a knowledge of human nature to each situation.

Since everyone has a unique combination of factors (or **filters**) such as needs, values, beliefs, experiences, education, goals, etc., (all of which combine to make up a person's character), it is through these filters that group members can see and hear the existence of possible psychological barriers. Consequently, it is through an understanding of how these filters can drive and/or influence one's character — either independently or collectively — that people can learn to avoid potential communication problems, including these barriers.

GUIDELINES TO AVOID BARRIERS

Listed below are guidelines that can help you to avoid communication barriers.

Aim at your target. Group members always want the target of their communication to understand the message thoroughly. Therefore, before sending a message, take a moment to aim at the target. Form the content and tone of the message so that it hits the target squarely and correctly, and on the first try.

Use several channels of communication and repeat important communication. Since barriers can easily filter or block information, communicators must often use several methods to relay the information. In addition, repeat important communication to ensure the information gets out to everyone.

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS

Factors that completely disrupt the flow of information are communication breakdowns. Presented below are three situations that can cause a total breakdown.

REASONS FOR COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS

Competing for a Person's Attention

People or things that compete for a person's attention may be one cause for a break down in communication. Competition for attention occurs when a person receiving the information is trying to do several tasks at once. For example, when somebody interrupts you, one solution that you can implement is to stop working, clear your mind, and concentrate on the new subject until you understand it, then resume work as before the interruption occurred.

However, if you are the person doing the interrupting, you should handle the situation differently. Your first step is to recognize that the other person is busy. If your concern can wait, let it. If you must interrupt, make it as short as possible.

Situations Affecting Self-Esteem

A communication breakdown can often result from a situation that affects the self-esteem of the parties involved. In such cases, if you are aware that certain people do not get along with each other, or have not established a **rapport**, consider this when giving a message that must go to or through the other.

Misunderstandings

Misunderstanding what someone expects of you is another factor that can lead to a communication breakdown. When one group member does what they think another member wants them to do, but actually they do not do what is expected, there is a serious lack of communication.

Misunderstandings often occur when a person uses a word or phrase to describe an action or event rather than actually describing what took place. For example, saying there was a "fight" between Bonnie and Cheryl is quite different from saying Bonnie and Cheryl do not like each other and had an argument last night over what to watch on television.

Another cause of misunderstandings is the use of jargon. Jargon occurs when social or professional groups use certain words that have special meanings because of the nature of the group. Communication breaks down when people outside the group, or new people to that group, do not understand the special meanings.

Distortions, Interpretations, and Filters

As you can see, group communications do not always run smoothly. In addition to various social influences or barriers, frequently someone will distort, dilute, change, or stop the information flow before it reaches everyone for whom the sender intended it. As information travels from one group member to another, each member has the opportunity to make it more specific by adding, changing, deleting, or refining the message.

Most communication processes are not always accurate or perfect since each person in a group must interpret what was said. Two more examples of opportunities for miscommunication are **grapevine** and **rumor**.

- Grapevine: An unofficial, informal communication network.

- Rumor: Poorly substantiated information that is passed along the grapevine.

CONCLUSION

Communicating is one of the most important things you do in life. *Do not think that it comes easily*! You must practice good communication skills daily; then, you will gradually see results and be able to communicate effectively and confidently in a group.

Material in this lesson adapted from:
Borchers, T. (1999). *Allyn & Bacon: Small Group Communication*. Retrieved December 2001, from http://www.abacon.com/commstudies